File CFV (extra)

D-11 board balks at affirming only 'traditional' marriages

Health education proposal clarifies but doesn't alter guidelines for teachers

By **Wendy Y. Lawton**/The Gazette

There's nothing new in a proposed Colorado Springs School District 11 rule covering health education. The draft is simply a collection of statements pulled from existing district policies, teaching guides and from state law.

However, the three-page draft does answer the question posed by Colorado for Family Values back in January: Would the school board pass a policy that supports sexual abstinence, discourages promiscuity and affirms "traditional," or heterosexual, marriage?

The answer, to be discussed by the board Wednesday night, is both "yes" and "no."

According to lesson plans, District 11 already teaches students that abstinence is the only way to truly prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. So the draft rule simply spits back what the district is doing now.

But when it comes to marriage, the school board drew the line.

It's not up to the schools to tell students what kinds of marriages and relationships — gay or straight — are best. The draft says that sort of teaching is up to parents.

Parents and families are the "primary influence and role models for students," the document states. So parents and families have the responsibility to teach children about "healthy and productive lifestyles and high-risk behaviors."

Board member Bruce Doyle, who co-authored the proposal along with board member Lyman Kaiser, said public schools simply cannot make a moral leap by teaching students that straight marriages are better than others.

"Homosexuality is a value that depends on who you are, and schools have to teach everyone," Doyle said. "To sit in judgment and say one kind of person or one kind of marriage is more valuable is not right."

Morality and judgment aside, Doyle said promoting "traditional" marriages could confuse or offend some students.

"Some kids may say 'What about me? I just have a mommy.' Or they could say 'I just have a daddy.' Or they could say 'I'm living with a daddy who has other children,' " he said. "There are all kinds of families out there."

By putting the responsibility of shaping opinions about relationships directly on the shoulders of parents, Doyle said, the district won't be contradicting what's taught at home.

But since this is already District 11's stance, why bother creating a new rule?

Doyle and other district officials said members of Colorado for Family Values asked the board to clarify its position on sex education issues and put them into a single statement.

Did politics have anything to do with the draft?

"I'd say, that yes, there were some politics involved. If people felt our position wasn't clearly stated, now it is," Doyle said.

Politics aside, precedent also played a role.

Bev Tarpley, head of curriculum for District 11, said she knows of no other school district in Colorado that has a policy promoting heterosexual marriage over gay marriage.

"Nobody wants to devalue anyone. Public schools want to be inclusive," Tarpley said.

The whole issue resurfaced four months ago, spinning out of a debate about articles on homosexuality that were published in the Palmer High School newspaper.

While free speech, family values and homosexuality were being dissected in crowded public hearings, the conservative Christian group CFV requested that the board come up with a sexual conduct policy dealing with abstinence, promiscuity and "traditional" marriage. CFV backed their call with a massive postcard campaign and helped pack a public hearing attended by more than 600 people in January.

Reached at his office Monday, CFV Chairman Will Perkins said he does not support the current proposal, but declined to elaborate.

IF YOU GO

What: District 11 school board meeting
When: 6:30 p.m. Wednesday
Where: Wasson High School auditorium, 2115 Afton Way
Why: Discussion of first draft of health education policy covering lessons on sex, drugs and alcohol and other topics